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ABSTRACT

In order to become empowered and autonomous writers, students need to learn self-evaluation techniques to help them revise their writing instead of simply editing it. Basic writers and English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) writers especially need concrete aids that can guide them, at least in the initial stages of learning, to write in a mode in which they have had little or no experience. One answer to this problem is to teach such students that revising is a process of reading to formulate questions about the text. A series of checklists can be very useful in introducing students to the skill of reading critically, a habit which can serve them well throughout their entire academic careers. These checklists could be answered by their peers after each student writer reads aloud a rough draft to the class. The questions on the checklists vary depending on the mode of rhetorical discourses being assigned: narrative, expository, or descriptive. Questions can be positive or negative. After the student has written and revised, other questions that target errors in grammar should be asked. The goal is to teach the students to look at their own drafts from the objective viewpoint of a reader, keeping in mind that the instructor is the final audience. (RS)

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The Teaching of Writing:
A Pedagogy of Hidden Questions

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In a recent review of research by Hillocks, the studies discussed indicated that writing is a recursive, creative process, idiosyncratic and individualistic. What was once thought of as a linear process, which included first thinking of a topic, then outlining, then writing, is instead a hierarchical one (71-81). The writer discovers the ideas he/she wishes to communicate as various versions or drafts are written. According to Flower and Hayes, central to the process is a sense of audience, the ability to detach oneself from one's own text in order to become aware of what the reader perceives when the text is read (278-87). In other words, the writing is directed toward the reader as the writer considers his or her requirements, including function and style.

In contrast, in traditional writing classes, writers hardly ever revised, or re-thought, their original rough drafts. What was considered revising was really editing with more attention to mechanics than ideas. As far as organization was concerned, students were expected to fit their ideas into existing templates of the so-called "ideal essay". The problem with this approach is that students never learned to develop that aspect of writing which involves cognitive skills; they never were taught that thinking plays an important part in the composing process. Researcher Sondra Perl found that basic writers focus on the

final product of written communication and defeat their efforts by premature and incomplete revising and editing procedures (317-336). Richard Beach's study compared students who were revisers with those whose concept of revising was really polishing with attention to mechanics. Those students who could not revise failed to see the connection between evaluation and revision (163-166). Yet, in order to become empowered, autonomous writers, they need to learn self-evaluation techniques which would serve to help them revise.

Moving from writer-based to reader-based prose is not easy, especially for basic and ESL writers. They need concrete aids that can guide them, at least in the initial stages of learning to write in a mode in which they have had little or no experience. One answer to this problem is to teach them that revising is a process of reading to formulate questions about the text. The answers to these questions can be incorporated into a newer, better version of the original text. A series of checklists can be very useful in introducing students to the skill of reading critically, a habit which can serve them well throughout their entire academic careers. These checklists could be answered by their peers after each student writer reads aloud a rough draft to the class.

Here are some questions that would help basic or ESL writers:

1. Does the essay have an introduction?

2. Does the conclusion let the reader know the essay has ended?

3. Were any ideas confusing or vague?

4. What ideas were particularly surprising or interesting? Could these be developed more?

5. Are any ideas repeated?

6. Can you think of any other questions you would like to ask the writer about the ideas contained in the text?

Students should be taught that these questions are merely examples; some will seem appropriate, and others will not. The focus here is to look at the text with a discriminating, evaluative eye. With this perspective, students can form other, more appropriate questions (see #6 above), all of which can lead to a better revised version of the original draft if incorporated into the writing process. It is also important to remember that questions can be both of a positive (see #4 above) as well as of a critical nature (such as #3 above).

The questions leading to revision could even vary depending on the mode of rhetorical discourses being assigned: narrative, expository, or description. For example, in expository essays that are argumentative, these questions could be helpful:

1. Is the writer's opinion or point of view clearly

stated at the introduction?

2. Is there sufficient evidence to support the argument? What kind of evidence is used?

3. Does the writer's biases weaken his/her argument?

4. Is the argument convincing?

Of course, in order to answer these questions, the students should be well acquainted with the expository essay form, and have seen samples of this kind of writing.

The questioning technique can be useful to help students write well-developed supporting paragraphs. Many times basic writers have a main idea which they can not flesh out to form a rich, detailed paragraph. At this point it is often useful to remind students that questions such as Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How? help fill out details and avoid over-generalization. These questions could be easily memorized and retrieved at the appropriate time, such as during a written essay test, when there is little time for revision.

Another helpful way that could help students develop ideas is by supporting them with anecdotes gleaned from experience or personal observation. The question, "Can you think of any anecdote that would help explain this idea more specifically?" could be included in the basic writer's checklist. This question, combined with the detail generating Who? What? How? etc., can be just the push a reluctant writer needs to finish

that all-important first draft.

After the student has written and revised, there are other questions that target surface errors, to assist students to edit and prepare the final copy, such as:

1. Is every comma used correctly?
2. Does every complete sentence end with a period?
3. Is there subject-verb agreement?
4. Are irregular past tense verbs correct?
5. Is the correct verb tense used consistently?
6. Are auxiliaries or modals used correctly?

If the basic writer is an ESL student, editing for grammar errors is of particular consequence. The questions could include checking for inflectional endings, word order, and vocabulary choice mistakes. One way to check for grammar errors is to have a native speaker read the ESL writer's draft aloud. Hearing the text from this perspective can help the writer identify errors, as well as reinforce listening skills in English. Furthermore, the kind of grammar questions can be related to the kind of writing that has been assigned. For example, if argument (expository) writing is being done, then questions can be asked about correct use of modals. In other words, make the questions of form fit the kind of content involved, not the reverse.

This technique of questioning can be developed in several ways. Students could be handed a sample list of questions

modeled by the teacher, and go over their own or a classmate's draft, asking these questions. Following this example, they can then formulate questions of their own. Writing groups or pairs could exchange papers and go over questions, discussing each student's draft as it is read aloud in turn. Or, xeroxed copies could be distributed and discussed with the teacher or student leading the questions, perhaps using an overhead projector. Remember: the goal here is to teach students to look at their own drafts from the objective viewpoint of a reader, keeping in mind that the instructor is the final audience. By learning to read their own drafts, they will gain more control of their own writing processes and products. By becoming more autonomous, self-reliant writers, they will become more successful.

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